

ROOMS ARE SUBJECT TO INSPECTION AT ANY GIVEN TIME

JOE NEAL

I stomped the snow off my boots and signed back in to the halfway house carrying two boxes of instant stuffing. The television in the common room showed the Thanksgiving parade to an empty couch. A sleepy looking Garfield was kept from floating away by a spread of cable tethers. Aside from the low chitchat of the parade commentators, the house was quiet. It would stay that way until the middle of the night. Someone on the floor above me had spent last night crying. I didn't knock on the ceiling. Without a baggie or bottle to fill the hole, there was little you could do sometimes but let a big wave crash. I watched the parade for a moment and went up to my room.

My pre-paid phone still had minutes, and I didn't like to use the one in the hallway. Some guys had nothing better to do than take note of your business. I dialed home, and the tone whirred in my ear. Outside, the snow had started to stick. An old woman across the street shoveled her sidewalk. Her head was wrapped in a clear plastic hood. I could hear the scrape of her shovel through the window.

"Yeah, hello. Who is this?"

"Hey, Dad," I said.

"Tim. Did something happen?"

"No, I'm fine. Is everyone coming over there today?"

"Yes, but—"

"I was thinking I could bring some stuffing."

"It's really not a good idea."

"I can make something else."

"You can stop that right now."

"I need you to see me like this. I don't even smoke."

"Is that right?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Sounds familiar is all."

"It's different this time."

"That too."

"If you really don't want me there."

"Timmy. How can I? How can I after that awful business?"

"My head is right."

"That awful business."

"Dad?"

"I'm here."

I pulled up the blinds and let them drop. The plastic tip on the end of the string snapped against the windowsill. Max, Dad's old beagle, barked on the other end of the phone.

"I have a job," I said.

"That right?"

"Just washing dishes, but it wears me out."

"Plenty of time to think, huh?"

"More than enough."

"That's good. Listen, the damn dog is going crazy." A motorized can opener throbbed in the background.

"You still there?" I asked.

"Not this time, okay? It's good you have a job. Maybe here soon."

"I understand."

"Alright, then."

"Alright."

A cube of butter melted in the boiling water. I added the powder from the pouches and doctored the mix with onions and mushrooms. While the stuffing was setting, I ironed my nice shirt and pants. After a splash of Brute, I signed out, carrying a casserole dish covered with aluminum foil. A couple guys were in the common room watching football, not talking to

each other.

The snow reflected in my headlight beams and blew across the state route like white sand. The heater was broken, and there was no radio. Answers had to be measured and honest. Eye contact should be made, but no jokes. Family members who have seen your mug shot don't want to hear about wild times. Positive and somber, that's what they expected. I took a breath and nodded, "Yes."

A doe jumped in front of the car. There was a single thump, and the doe went forward ten feet. The stuffing hit the dashboard and scattered on the floor.

The windshield wipers knocked left then right. There had been that instant of commotion, and now nothing. The engine idled in a low drum. Snowflakes tapped on the windows.

I parked on a patch of gravel and dialed the police with my pre-paid. White farm fields stretched out on either side of the road. My orange hazard lights flicked on and off. The doe was white from the streetlight then orange from the hazards. I watched for a while, and it occurred to me that a car might swerve around the doe and slide off the road.

The double yellow lines in the middle of the road were raised a little. I moved my dress shoe across to feel the difference between the road and the line. White specks landed in my eyes and melted. The longer hairs in the doe's fur lifted in the wind. It seemed the best way to drag it was by the hooves. I stepped closer and crushed a small pile of road salt.

The doe snapped its head up, and I fell back. I could see that its front legs were broken when it reached the side of the road. The back legs ran independently pushing the doe's front end across the snow. It stopped trying to run and bunched itself next to a tree. I got back in my car. There was just enough light to make out the doe's long neck and pointy ears batting away the falling snow.

A police cruiser parked behind me. The officer left the blue and red lights spinning. I stood next to him on the gravel. He held a large flashlight to his shoulder and shined it on the doe.

"You'd be surprised how much this happens," he said.

"That right?"

"It's hard to straight kill a deer with a car in a forty five zone. A truck or semi will do it."

He kept his eyes on me after I nodded.

"What's your name, son?" he asked, turning toward me.

"Tim Fairmont."

"From around here?"

"Close by."

"Close by, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Still using?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You don't remember me?"

"No, sir."

"But you know why I asked." The radio on his shoulder let out a call in a code of numbers.

"Yes, sir."

"That's good. I don't buy blackout stories. That's weakness. You're not weak, are you, boy?"

His leather belt crunched as he stepped closer. He pointed his flashlight to the hood of the cruiser.

"Sit, please."

The officer moved a penlight in front of my eyes. I could just see him back there in the dark, looking hard for any flicker.

Remember was all you did these days. The eight balls, the grocery store vodka, and the bouncer who wouldn't let you in the bar were all photographic. The blood and flesh on your keys you used to slash the bouncer were colorful and in focus. The hole wouldn't fill that night, and your animal crawled out.

You remembered the officer, his incredible strength and thick wrist in your throat as he pulled you away from the bouncer. You remembered how calm he was on the drive to the station, how he kept looking at you in the rearview mirror.

The officer clicked off the penlight and rested his hand on his gun. Snow was gathering on the plastic brim of his cap.

"He has a big scar, right here," the officer said and slid his gloved thumb from his cheekbone to his jaw. "He's retired police."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know what that means?"

"Yes, sir. I know all of it."

"All of it, huh?"

Another code of numbers came from his shoulder.

"Stay right here," he said and snapped open a leather strap on his holster.

The officer kept the flashlight at his shoulder and the gun to his side as he walked toward the doe. The doe pushed its front end to the edge of a field and stopped again. The beam from the flashlight traced up its hind legs and stopped on the head. The doe's black eyeball reflected the light for an instant, and then its head flipped back from the sledgehammer force of the bullet.

"Monroe to dispatch," the officer said into his shoulder.

"Go ahead," dispatch crackled.

"Get Pudge on the line. Tell him we need a pickup on Route 4, about two clicks before the overpass."

"Copy that."

I looked at the front of my car while the officer filled out paperwork. A clump of hairs stuck out of the grill. They were coarse and tough like the hairs of a broom. I threw them into the snow.

A diesel pickup truck with yellow flashing lights backed into the grass. Pudge looked like a professional wrestler. He talked to the officer, and then we all walked over to the doe. Pudge knelt down and put his hands on the doe's ribs.

"Probably too much blood in the muscle to use, but you want the meat? We can do it for you," Pudge said to me.

"Oh, no thank you."

He gathered the doe's legs, two in each hand, and hoisted it onto his truck bed. Its head bounced off the tailgate.

"Thanks, Pudge," the officer said.

"Y'all have a good night."

Pudge drove away. The officer handed me a piece of paper.

"You have a nice holiday, Tim Fairmont," he said and got back into the cruiser. The spinning lights went off. The officer turned onto the state route and sped away. I got in my car and watched the snow gather on the windshield. The flakes hit and slid down to the wipers making a little white pile. How sweet it would be right now: the quick snort, the drip, and a little vodka chaser to keep from getting too fast. You never lost the taste, the way it made you see the world, the harmony of all the functions coming together in the powder on the tip of a key. My pre-paid beeped. The battery was dying.

Relatives' cars lined the street and driveway. I pushed the casserole dish and spilled stuffing under the passenger seat. I stood in the street and tucked in my shirt. One of the doe's hairs had stuck to my coat. I swiped it to the ground and kicked snow on top.

Max barked when I came in the back door. I snapped my fingers and he put his nose on the carpet. Dad came back with a mouth full of food and a smile meant for someone else. He had put on weight in the stomach, but looked strong as ever. A glob of mashed potato was in the corner of his mouth.

"What did I tell you? Your cousins will be scared."

"Can I just say hi to everyone? I have to get back for curfew."

"Curfew?"

"We get more time on holidays."

"Damn it."

"Five minutes."

"Jesus," he said and finally wiped his mouth. "Real quick. Go easy, okay?"

"Sure."

We hugged and he patted my back.

"You're still my boy," he said when we let go. "You've just made it real hard."

"I know."

“You go in, and I’ll make you a plate.”

“Okay.”

“You didn’t make that stuffing?”

“I waited to the last minute. The store near me was out.”

He slapped my back.

“You have to plan,” he said.

Everyone was in the television room. The adults had trays and pillows on their laps. The kids were on the floor. Aunt Clara cried when we hugged. Harold gave me a strong handshake and said to keep my head up. The kids wouldn’t look me in the eye. I went to hug Grandma Ruth and kicked over one of the kid’s sodas. Someone gasped softly, and Ana June was down on the carpet in an instant with paper towels. I said I wasn’t staying, and everyone was more relaxed in saying goodbye. Dad handed me a plate with aluminum foil crumpled over the edges.

“Never again like this,” he said on our way to the back door.

“I understand.”

“Drive safe,” he said, and we shook hands.

I signed back in. The television was still on in the common room. I sat on the torn couch and watched the news. People all over town had volunteered to scoop food for the homeless. It was going to stop snowing tomorrow. You could see the green from the radar moving away from the county. I took the foil off the plate and worked it into a ball. I didn’t feel like going upstairs for utensils, so I ate everything with my hands.